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## **Transnational communication as discourse, ritual and strategy**

Brüggemann, Michael ; Wessler, Hartmut

**Abstract:** Globalized communication flows transcend and transform national borders. Transnational media outlets targeting audiences around the globe, issues of global concern are subjected to border-crossing public debates, media events receive transnational attention, and public diplomacy efforts succeed—and fail—in characteristic patterns around the world. In response to these phenomena the article shows how the study of transnational communication can benefit from combining 3 theoretical perspectives that are rarely studied together: communication as deliberation, as ritual, and as strategy. Particularly in explaining the failures of transnational communication, explanatory potential often seems to lie just outside the limited vision of each of the 3 perspectives—and outside the scope of empirical analyses that are limited to Western contexts.

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**Transnational Communication as Discourse, Ritual and Strategy**

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Transnational Communication as Deliberation, Ritual and Strategy

Abstract

Globalized communication flows transcend and transform national borders. Transnational communication as an emerging field of research challenges some of the assumptions of traditional models of communication. Research needs to take account of the evolving transnational level of communications and its interactions with national media cultures. Most importantly, the article shows how the study of transnational communication can benefit from combining three perspectives that are rarely studied together: communication as deliberation, as ritual and as strategy. Particularly in explaining the failures of transnational communication, explanatory potential often seems to lie just outside the limited vision of each of the three perspectives – and outside the scope of empirical analyses that are limited to Western contexts.

**Key words:** Transnational communication, global media studies, international communication, discourse, ritual, strategy, public sphere, media event, public diplomacy

## Transnational Communication as Deliberation, Ritual and Strategy

Extending the reach of human communication and community across space and time is the purpose of mediated communication. Modern infrastructures of communication have dramatically extended the reach of communications, routinely transcending national and cultural boundaries (Thussu, 2007). Prime examples of transnational media outlets are Al Jazeera English and CNN International but also formerly national media such as the British Guardian and BBC News have extended their reach online to grasp the attention of (English speaking) audiences across the globe (Bicket & Wall, 2009; Thurman, 2007). Transnational media events ranging from popular culture celebrations like the Eurovision song contest to political events like the UN climate summit 2009 in Copenhagen capture the attention of media users around the world (Couldry, Hepp, & Krotz, 2009). TV formats, films as well as news have become globally traded goods produced by corporations that flexibly adapt to the respective local legislation and cultural preferences. All these phenomena call for adapting our conceptual tools in order to accommodate for the realities of transnational communication.

Media phenomena analyzed in the emerging research field of *transnational communication* have two basic characteristics in common. They are related to communication flows across borders and they transcend the framework of neatly separated national media systems. They also often, but not always, involve Western and non-Western contexts as well as the relations between them.

The term *transnational communication* directs our attention toward the tension between the enduring powers of the national framework and the existence of communication phenomena that transcend it. The concept draws from globalization theory and theories about the transcultural character of today's media world (see e.g. Tomlinson, 1999, Hepp, 2009) in stressing that communication today does not only occur *inter-nationally*, as interaction between national entities. It transforms national entities and contextualizes them within the

framework of wider transnational media cultures. Yet, the nation state is not gone, but remains a powerful context of public communication (Curran & Park, 2000; Hafez, 2007; Morris & Waisbord, 2001). The coexistence of communication bound by national borders and transnational communication practices has become one of the defining features of today's media culture.

In theorizing transnational communication we wish to make two arguments. First, we distinguish three theoretical perspectives that prove particularly fruitful in analyzing transnational communication: a deliberative, a ritual and a strategic perspective. We draw on three bodies of research loosely married to these perspectives: research on the *transnationalization of public spheres*, on *transnational media events* and on *mediated public diplomacy*, respectively. The three perspectives have remained relatively separate to date. Thus we aim at showing what kind of analytical leverage we can gain from combining them when analyzing transnational communications.

Second, we demonstrate how the close examination of non-Western communication contexts and cultures provokes and suggests revisions in these traditionally Western perspectives. We aim at showing how insights from non-Western contexts question, alter and enrich the theoretical repertoire available to students of transnational communication around the world. The field of transnational communication could not have risen to the relevance it now legitimately claims without the contributions from researchers of non-Western descent. Therefore, in developing the three perspectives we also point to the roles such contributions play in extending our vision beyond the Western scope.

Three Dimensions of Communication

The deliberative, the ritual, and the strategic perspective should be seen as complementary: While any one of them zooms in on one particular dimension of communication – its deliberative qualities, its ritual enactments, or its strategic intentions and effects -, all three also fill in each other's voids and blind spots. Most acts of transnational

communication display more than one of the three dimensions and are thus suitable for investigations combining the different perspectives. We begin here with a brief delineation of the three perspectives before we turn to an identification of each one's analytical leverage in explaining transnational communication.

### Communication as Deliberation

Communication is deliberative if it enables the exchange of ideas and, ideally, results in some kind of enhanced understanding of an issue and the related controversies at hand. In order to be deliberative, however, communication does not need to fulfil the conditions of the ideal speech situation as developed by Jürgen Habermas. A more modest definition would follow Peters (2005, p. 87) in understanding deliberation as occurring “whenever a debate takes place in which statements and judgements are backed by justification, argumentative or evidentiary support.” Even in the long run, deliberation might not result in consensus, but in an enhanced understanding of the other. Peters (2005) sees discourse<sup>1</sup> as “the primary medium for the development of public knowledge, values, interpretations and self-understandings, for change and innovation, as well as reproduction or transmission over time in the inventory of ideas and arguments that are available in a given public sphere” (p.88).

From this deliberative perspective, the *public sphere* is the forum for deliberative exchanges.<sup>2</sup> It is constituted by free discursive exchanges that are open to all citizens, deal with issues of common relevance and provide the necessary transparency and validation of ideas to enable citizens to participate meaningfully in public life (Habermas, 1989; Peters, 2005). Today, the mass media serve as the main forum that integrates different arenas of public communication (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Most research that deals with journalism's role in democracy or evaluates the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> Peters (2005) uses the words discourse and deliberation as largely synonymous. This article opts for deliberation, as many researchers from the French- and English-speaking research communities have a much broader understanding of discourse that goes beyond the exchange of reasons and arguments.

debates including their diversity, balance, bias etc. is at least implicitly and loosely connected to this view of public communication. Deliberative public sphere theory has been criticized on two grounds that are important in our context: It neglects less rational modes of communication and – in its formulation by Habermas from the 1960s – it is caught up in the Westphalian framework of nation states and needs to be adjusted to the study of transnational communication (Fraser, 2007).

**Communication as Ritual**

Especially research rooted in or influenced by the cultural studies tradition has noted long ago that communication often serves other purposes and follows other logics than those of rational deliberation. Then, communication is not about information or argumentation but about community and collective identification, including conflict and struggle between different such identifications, played out in communication and media use. Such a “cultural approach to communication” was developed, for example, by James Carey who points to the common roots of the words communication and community and explains: “A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time [...]”. Communication is “not the act of imparting information or influence but the creation, representation and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs” (Carey, 1989, p. 43). Consequently, reading a newspaper is not seen as a citizen’s duty to monitor relevant events but “more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed” (Carey, 1989, p. 20). In more recent research, the perspective of communication as ritual has been widely used in the analysis of *media events* (Dayan & Katz, 1992) – a concept that like public sphere theory, can be fruitfully adapted to the transnational level and to Western and non-Western contexts alike (Couldry et al., 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> In other research contexts the term public sphere is understood in a much broader way: then it could be equivalent to public communication in general or anything that is openly accessible in a cultural context.

## Communication as Strategy

A third perspective views communication as a strategic attempt to influence and control others' knowledge, world views and behaviour. "Strategic communication is the study of how organizations or communicative entities communicate deliberately to reach set goals." (Holtzhausen, 2008). These "communicative entities" comprise political and economic actors and even celebrities in sports or entertainment and they pursue a wide range of different goals (Holtzhausen, 2008). Research on propaganda, advertising and public relations focuses on this dimension of communication. Strategies aim at achieving certain effects while minimizing side and boomerang effects that counteract the communicator's intentions. As we will elaborate below, this perspective is less strongly developed in the area of transnational communication, but deserves more scholarly attention.

In Habermas' work strategic communication is explicitly contrasted with deliberative communication as mutually exclusive orientations (Habermas, 1987). Yet, while public debates represent the results of different forms of strategic communication by different actors, they may still serve the exchange of arguments and discard some of the worst ideas and arguments as posited by the deliberative perspective. And they will almost inadvertently define collective identities in the course of the communicative exchange. Thus, focussing one's research on one perspective is legitimate to respond to specific research questions but for a broader understanding of public communication, an integrative approach is desirable.

While all three dimensions are often present in communication, they are more or less salient. Some forms of public communication (such as a debate-style article in a broadsheet newspaper) lend themselves more to identifying deliberation while others (like a popular media event) are more closely aligned with the ritual dimension of communication.

## Deliberative Communication: Research on Transnational Public Spheres

### From the National to the Transnational



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Cross-border communication flows preceded the birth of the nation state. Also, the origins of public sphere theory, enlightenment ideas about citizen’s rights and demands for participation, are couched as universal claims not bound to a nation state. Yet, public sphere theory thrived in the national setting. The reason for this close connection is that modern liberal democracy developed in national boundaries and the development of the printed press as the prime forum of mediated deliberation has historically paralleled the development of nation states.

In transnationalizing deliberative public sphere theory it is helpful to first disentangle its analytical and its normative dimension. Analytically, one should ask whether the model of the public sphere as an open social space for public deliberation can be transposed to the transnational level. Normatively, one needs to address the problem of democracy beyond the nation-state.

In analytical terms, the public sphere has been defined as a network of different arenas connected by communication flows and integrated by mass media (Ferree et al., 2002; Habermas, 1989). Public spheres need not necessarily be conceptualized as *territorial* spaces of communication, but as networks of communicative exchange that transcend time and space. The borders of a *public* sphere are permeable by definition. Yet, communication flows are more intense within the boundaries of a public sphere than beyond (Deutsch 1956). Different public spheres may overlap as more or less integrated networks of communication. Transnational public spheres, in turn, may evolve through the transnationalization of national (or even subnational, sectoral or issue-specific) public spheres that open up for each other across borders (Gerhards, 2001). National public spheres persist within the broader transnational sphere as networks with a higher density of communication flows. Habermas (2001b) has discussed this with regard to the case of a European public sphere: “A European-wide public sphere must not be imagined as the projection of a familiar design from the

national onto the European level. It will rather emerge from the mutual opening of existing national universes to one another [...]” (p. 18).

This transnationalization of public spheres has been conceptualized and empirically measured as a multi-dimensional process (Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-v.Königslöw, & Sifft, 2008; Koopmans & Statham, 2010). The analysis might start out with the infrastructures of communication that extend beyond national borders. This refers to *technical* infrastructures (starting with the telegraph and including broadband internet and mobile connections today) and *social* infrastructures such as the employment of correspondents abroad and the formation of transnational media organizations.

A second relevant dimension is the transformation of media content. Quantitative content analysis has tried to grasp the transnationalization of media coverage by distinguishing two dimensions (see: Koopmans & Erbe, 2004 with regards to Europeanization): Vertical transnationalization denotes increased attention to transnational actors, policies and topics (such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organization). Horizontal transnationalization includes increased mutual attention and exchange between different national public spheres. A more qualitative approach to media content may also look for a third indicator of transnationalization: an emerging participant perspective. For example, media may cover EU affairs from the perspective of a national observer of EU governance or from the perspective of being a participant in a transnational debate of matters of common concern (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Risse, 2010; Trenz, 2004; van de Steeg, 2002). Speakers in public deliberation may use other nations as negative reference points (‘othering’) or they may start to address speakers from abroad as participants in a common debate (Wessler et al., 2008).

In line with this kind of research, Olausson (2013) demands to go beyond looking at technological infrastructures when searching for “global media” and focusing on the discursive construction of the global. Thus, local media outlets may provide a global outlook

through discursively constructing connections between the local, the national and the global level as well as between Western and non-Western world regions (also see: Berglez, 2008). This goes beyond the domestication of foreign policy issues (Clausen 2004) and includes a global contextualization of local issues. Studies have identified different degrees of “cosmopolitan coverage” (Brüggemann & Kleinen-v.Königslöw, 2013) or “mediated cosmopolitanism” (Robertson, 2010) in different news outlets: Neither do media with a transnational audience automatically provide a global perspective, nor do popular newspapers always provide a parochial image of the world.

Less well researched is a third dimension, the transnationalization of audiences. From the public sphere perspective audiences are not only relevant as consumers of foreign or transnational media, but also as *publics* who see themselves and act as participants in a debate (Livingstone 2005).

Transnational public spheres are more likely to evolve in settings with either a common language or strong political, economic and cultural ties or common political institutions. This is why so much research and theorizing has been devoted to the quest for a European public sphere resulting in different interpretations about whether it actually exists or not (for an overview see de Vreese, 2007, Risse, 2010, Wessler et al., 2008, and the contributions in Koopmans & Statham, 2010). The disagreement about the European public sphere arises from different standards applied in evaluating *when* to speak of a public sphere (Trenz, 2008). The core of a transnational public sphere seems to be whether (1) a debate on common issues actually takes place with some form of (2) exchange of arguments across national borders (also see van de Steeg, 2002).

While a lot of the literature is focussed on Europe with its common political institutions, there are other links that integrate public spheres transnationally, especially in non-Western contexts. Language, culture and a common experience of authoritarian rule are important strings that connect the pan-Arab public sphere (Sakr, 2007). This also gave rise to

transnationalized forms of rebellion during the Arab Spring. Western and Non-Western public spheres may diverge on the kind of media that form the backbone of the debate: The European public sphere – at least as reconstructed by most researchers – is an elite sphere represented by national quality newspapers: The Financial Times could arguably be considered as being the core publication of the EU-centered media sphere (Corcoran & Fahy 2009). The Arab public sphere on the other hand has a strong oral tradition (Ayish, 2008) that translates into transnational television and mobile phones being more important conduits in addition to social network media such as Twitter and Facebook (Zayani, 2005; Rinke & Röder, 2012). Focusing on West Africa, Larkin (2004) shows how national video producers in Nigeria build on the infrastructures established for the transnational distribution of pirated music and entertainment and finally generate their own content. Appadurai et al. (1994) analyze the “black public sphere” as a distinct form of post-national communication space. The black public sphere can hardly be classified as Western or Non-Western, given that it is symbolically rooted in Africa but also caters for and lives of the contributions from the diaspora in Western countries. Studies of transnational public spheres thus go beyond the West and they call for a de-Westernized, contextualized analysis of different media forms in different settings around the world.

While the diversity and intensity of transnational flows of communication arguably constitute different kinds of overlapping transnational public spheres, the normative perspective of public sphere theory draws attention to one fundamental deficit: the lack of democracy on the transnational level. A functioning public sphere implies that policy makers are – at least to some degree – attentive and responsive to societies’ demands as articulated in public deliberation. Only to the extent that democratic procedures are put into place at the transnational level, can we plausibly expect the public sphere to gain the same communicative power that it has historically acquired on the national level. Habermas (2001a,b) and Fraser (Fraser, 2007) who are sometimes seen as opponents on how to conceptualize the public

sphere fully agree on this critical impetus of public sphere theory that ultimately calls for a politicization and democratization of transnational governance. The normative core of public sphere theory should not be lost when we extend its analytic scope beyond the national realm and beyond the West.

**Accounting for the Strategic and Ritual Dimensions of Transnational Public Spheres**

Often, the normative standards advanced by deliberative public sphere theory are not met in actual transnational media debates. One might only consider the debate about saving the Euro and European economies. While the debate is highly transnationalized with actors from other countries taking a prominent role in national media debates, we may *not* witness the emergence or strengthening of a European public sphere. This is due to mechanisms that can be explained by looking at European debates from the point of view of strategy and ritual. National politicians frequently engage in scape-goating and credit-claiming when they address transnational issues (Meyer, 1999): Transnational institutions such as the EU or foreign governments are blamed for the problems while credit for solving these problems is claimed by domestic politicians (also see Gerhards, Offerhaus, & Roose, 2007). These mechanisms also work between different governments: German politicians blame Southern European governments for the Euro crisis and, conversely, German chancellor Angela Merkel is compared to Hitler and blamed for the current problems in Southern Europe. This mutual scape-goating obviously disturbs citizen's ability to rationally evaluate EU and national policy. Yet, this pattern of public communication is perfectly understandable from a strategic point of view. An analysis that only searches for communicative rationality in the arguments presented in public deliberation will miss this point. It is rational (understood as being in their own interest) for national politicians to blame other actors for their failures as long as national media fail to hold national politicians accountable for this practice.

Also, one might wonder why some media debates in some countries show such an astonishing degree of parochialism in spite of decades of globalization. Again, Europe may serve as an illustration: Its member states are highly interdependent, much law-making takes place at the EU level. Yet, different media outlets and countries show vastly different patterns of Europeanization: The British press turns out to be the most parochial in Europe (Pfetsch, Adam & Eschner, 2010). Not only popular newspapers like The Sun but also broadsheets like The Times consistently display less cosmopolitan coverage than the press in France, Germany or Austria (Brüggemann & Kleinen-v. Königslöw, 2013). An analysis of national discourse *cultures* may help to explain how it is part of the domestic national ritual to define Britain as thoroughly non-European (Hepp, Brüggemann, Kleinen-v. Königslöw, Lingenberg, & Möller, 2012).

Furthermore, in many countries, the press and politicians stick to the illusion that national politics is in charge of solving today's problems. This apparent irrationality of public deliberations may be better understood by adding not only the strategic, but also the ritual dimension to the equation: Journalists ritually use the same national sources for producing news and they address the (perceived) needs of audiences to affirm their traditional view of themselves – as a national community that is governed by national politicians for a (nationally defined) people. These media rituals affirm feelings of self-determination and autonomy in order to cater for perceived cultural needs ignoring high degrees of political and economic interdependence.

The failure of public communications to reflect the hybridity and interdependence of today's world can only partly be explained by a lack of transnational exchange of world views and arguments. It needs reference to strategic communication by national actors and, probably most importantly, the rituals of national community-building.

### **Ritual Communication: Research on Transnational Media Events**

**From the National to the Transnational**

Although ritual elements can be found in almost everything the media do, not all media types and formats lend themselves equally well to ritual experiences. Ritual functions come into focus most clearly when we look at specific public performances staged for and by the media that strongly bind audience attention and participation. Such performances, revolving around a live television broadcast, have been called “media events” by Dayan and Katz (1992).

They describe media events as a particular TV genre that involves ritual ways of communal viewing. TV presenters leave their critical observer position and assume a bardic or even priestly role (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 34). Three types of performance scripts (contest, conquest, coronation) enact ritual functions in different ways: *Coronations* are mediated performances of ceremonies that are centered around rites of passage of the high and mighty: mainly weddings, coronation ceremonies, and funerals. The ritual element is enshrined in the ceremony itself. *Conquests* on the other hand are characterized by highly symbolic public gestures (kissing the soil; kneeling as a symbol of humility, etc.) that are designed to usher in a new era. These gestures can take on “shamanizing” functions in that their very performance transforms social reality for those participating (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 147-187). For *contests* the routinely repeated competition between contestants ritually constructs fan communities and reaffirms (fair) contests as rule-stabilizing procedures.

The confinement of media events to these three scripts in Dayan and Katz’s original work was widely criticized (for a review of different lines of criticism see Hepp & Couldry 2009). Therefore Katz and Liebes (2007) have proposed a complementary typology of traumatic media events: disaster, terror and war. The media performance of such negative events involves ritual elements just as the ceremonial types do. Riegert and Olsson (2007) point to the importance of ritual in crisis journalism by showing how media suspend their observer position in favour of emotional, compassionate and reassuring coverage. Media

performances of natural disasters can trigger a discourse of global compassion and abet the temporary construction of a global community of solidarity (Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2008). Terror events are routinely used to reaffirm the master narratives of the attacked country or culture (Nossek, 2008), and journalists gradually reinstate – through their presence on screen and their reporting – a sense of order, control and return to normality (Weimann, 1987). The media representations of war, finally, usually lead to a ritual “rallying around the flag” and a strong temporary identification with national leaders and individual “war heroes”, a situation in which camp-bridging debate dissipates (Wessler & Adolphsen, 2008).

Thus, media events perform ritual functions irrespective of their concrete experiential valence. Whether they encourage celebration, mourning, consolation or revolt (see figure 2), the experience of “fellowship and commonality” (Carey, 1988, p. 18) is central to the functioning of media events. In transposing the concept to the transnational level, then, the main question is about the nature, scope and emotional grip of the transient communities produced by mediated performances of such transnational media events. Just as individual human figures can evoke almost universal support and respect (see the examples of Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela), some media event performances are also largely uncontested around the world with respect to their core message or theme. Other media events, however, are performed very differently in different national and cultural contexts, thus creating cross-border dispute and strife. Hepp and Couldry (2009, p. 11) stress that on the global level, media events are unlikely to create the kind of “shared experience” that is at the heart of the original conception of media events. The articulation of a “global we” in the construction of media events across Western and non-Western cultures is not very likely.

Key to understanding why some transnational media events bridge divides while others deepen the rifts between different collectives lies in the differential transnational constellation of symbolic resources. By symbolic resources we mean established patterns of interpretation, symbols, narratives, images that structure the framing of a media event. The



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3 symbolic resources invested in performing transnational media events in different contexts  
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5 can vary considerably, and they can create substantial differences in the kinds of communities  
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7 that can be experienced and imagined around these events (see figure 1).  
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10 In a globalized world there is no reservoir of cross-culturally shared values that event  
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12 organizers, media and audiences can easily activate to make sense of a specific event.  
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14 Therefore, transnational dispute seems to be the default option and a transnational community  
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16 of mourning or outrage, for example, would have to be actively constructed through the event  
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18 performance in each individual case. Globalized media events are subject to a logic of  
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20 “conflictualization” (Dayan, 2010, p. 26).  
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24 Still, we find a number of examples which succeed in creating transnational imagined  
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26 communities, especially in the context of empathizing with distant suffering: Natural disasters  
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28 such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004/2005 are particularly prone to drawing compassion  
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30 from all quarters. Even the publication of the torture photos from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in  
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32 2004 created outrage across the world and found very few defenders. On the other hand,  
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34 discourses around these events differed greatly inside and outside the Western world. In the  
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36 U.S. a combination of disgust and shame prevailed and a debate ensued as to whether the  
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38 scandal was a consequence of deliberate policy decisions or the act of misguided individual  
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40 soldiers (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2006). In the Arab world disgust was paired with  
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42 anger and the incident was partly interpreted in the context of long-standing relations of  
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44 colonization by the West (Khouri, 2004). The crisis following the publication of the so-called  
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46 Mohammed cartoons in the Danish daily “Jyllands Posten” in 2005 was highly conflict-laden  
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48 as well and was interpreted as a “clash of civilizations” between “the West” and “the Muslim  
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50 world” in many parts of the world (Eide, Kunelius, Phillips, 2008). The terrorist attacks on  
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52 September 11, 2011, are an even stronger example in this direction. The character of the  
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54 communities constructed around transnational media events are a function, we contend, of  
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56 their dominant experiential valence and the constellation of symbolic resources across the  
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globe. Jointly, these factors determine whether a transnational media event leads to increased "othering" and greater perceived distance between communities or to a more cosmopolitan identification (see figure 1).

*[Figure 1: about here]*

### Accounting for Strategic and Deliberative Dimensions of Media Events

The ritual analysis of transnational media events outlined above can strongly benefit from both a strategic and a discursive perspective. The nature of a media event as a social construction implies that its public interpretation is the result of strategic struggles between different actors who translate social power into symbolic power (Hepp & Couldry 2009, 11). Media organizations also act strategically when they mystify their own role through the "hegemonic imagination of the media as the center of present societies" (Hepp & Couldry 2009, 5). Media events are inherently contested and permeated by power dynamics, and these conflictual dynamics should be at the center of media event analysis. In addition, there are at least two more specific benefits of integrating a strategic vantage point.

First, the strategic perspective directs our attention to a certain class of transnational media events that have not been mentioned yet but are increasingly salient: staged global political media events such as summit meetings and high-profile multilateral conferences (Hallin & Mancini, 1992; Adolphsen & Lück, 2012). The 2009 UN climate conference in Copenhagen is a case in point. Strategically framed as "Hopenhagen" by globally acting environmental NGOs as well as governments and the UN, many media seized the opportunity to align themselves with what promised to become a positive turning point of historic proportions. This symbolic loading of the event only increased the ensuing disappointment after a global climate treaty failed to materialize. Media events remain risky even for strategic actors who invest a lot of resources in their staging. From an analytical angle, staged global

political media events are an instrument of public diplomacy, i.e. an effort to influence foreign or transnational actors by swaying media coverage and public opinion in their constituencies.

Secondly, a strategic perspective can help explain some of the disenchantment that surrounds media event performances more recently. Almost anything can be strategically subjected to media event treatment today. As a result, media events “still mobilize huge audiences, but they have lost a large part of their enchantment. Bureaucratically managed, they are an exploited resource within a political economy of collective attention. Their magic is dissipating. They have become strategic venues.” (Dayan, 2010, p. 28). The ubiquitous strategy of staging anything as if it was of crucial importance for society’s mediated self-understanding makes the individual event less unique and less valuable for ritual imaginations of community. Thus, disenchantment is a result of over-strategizing.

Finally, and this is where the deliberative perspective comes in, each media event is embedded in a topically related media debate, a larger context that confers meaning on the event. These discursive contexts, again, vary cross-nationally and cross-culturally. A deliberative perspective on transnational media events opens our eyes for the fact that in one context an event may be uncontested and successful (in the sense that its performance makes sense for audiences) while in another context the same performance may be criticized for its manipulative intentions and seductive effect. The Beijing Olympics 2008 may be a good example here, reinforcing the official discourse of Chinese nationalism in the state-owned media and meeting with fierce opposition among Tibetan protesters and some of their Western sympathizers.

Combining the ritual and the deliberative perspectives on a transnational media event like this allows for an analysis of the conditions under which media suspend their critical observer status and engage in the reverent media event mode, as well as the conditions under which they uphold journalistic distance and instigate critical debate. Media events are not media events by nature. Instead media and audiences must actively engage with them as

occasions for ritual enactments. And the boundary conditions for such decisions are set by the national and transnational deliberative environments.

### **Strategic Communication: Research on Public Diplomacy**

#### **From the National to the Transnational**

Strategic communication is generally oriented toward reaching an intended effect in a target entity. Beyond intended effects strategic communication may have side effects that counteract the communicator's intentions (so-called boomerang effects). Inadequate wording, culturally unacceptable depictions or a communicator's lack of perceived trustworthiness can create resistance in the target group and thus render strategic communication efforts ineffective or counterproductive, especially across the Western/non-Western divide.

Under conditions of globalization both professions engaged in strategic communication, advertising and public relations, are increasingly conducted across borders (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2008; Sriramesh, 2008). This multiplies the possibility of misunderstanding and cultural incongruence and thus of side and boomerang effects. Both transnational advertising and public relations campaigns are confronted with the question whether they should standardize their communications across all target contexts or instead adapt to local preferences and communication norms (Botan, 1992). Adaptation is more costly and risks losing the common message of a transnational communication campaign. Yet, a failure to adapt to local cultural contexts can result in serious boomerang effects.

In addition, in today's globalized and real-time media environment it is almost impossible to target a message to one group exclusively without reaching other groups at the same time. Digital networks have a paradox effect: Smaller target groups may be reached more easily than in traditional mass media. Yet, via Twitter, Facebook or YouTube each information may eventually reach beyond its addressees and cross cultural and national borders. Political leaders experience this dilemma when they proclaim something publicly for

1  
2  
3 their voters at home that may be understood as a threat or offense in other countries and  
4  
5 cultures. It is therefore safe to say that transnational strategic communication is much more  
6  
7 complex and riskier than such communication in a purely national context, and its outcomes  
8  
9 clearly more uncertain for communicators.  
10

11  
12         Sophisticated theories and reliable findings about transnational strategic  
13  
14 communication processes are still relatively sparse. In the following we focus on those forms  
15  
16 of public relations that are directed at publics and media in other countries and relate to  
17  
18 political matters broadly conceived: *public diplomacy* (PD) or *mediated public diplomacy*  
19  
20 (MPD) (Cull, 2008; Snow & Taylor, 2009). Public diplomacy is defined by Gilboa (2008) as  
21  
22 the process in which “state and nonstate actors use the media and other channels of  
23  
24 communication to influence public opinion in foreign societies” (p. 58). Mediated public  
25  
26 diplomacy “involves short term and more targeted efforts using mass communication  
27  
28 (including the Internet) to increase support of a country’s specific foreign policies among  
29  
30 audiences beyond that country’s borders” (Entman, 2008, p. 88).  
31  
32  
33

34         Gilboa (2001) offers a fruitful – even if not necessarily exhaustive – typology that  
35  
36 specifies three fundamental variants of public diplomacy efforts. In the *basic variant* the  
37  
38 government of country A tries to influence the population of country B (or several other  
39  
40 countries) in order to ultimately induce a more favorable position of government B. This  
41  
42 influence can flow through the media of the target countries, through transnational media such  
43  
44 as CNN International used in the target countries, or through media outlets sponsored and run  
45  
46 by country A itself (international broadcasters such as Voice of America, Russia Today etc.).  
47  
48 Secondly, in the *domestic PR variant* government A uses a PR firm in the target country to  
49  
50 organize its PD efforts. Here the hope is that the domestic agency will facilitate local  
51  
52 adaptation and that the ultimate sponsor of the PD activity will remain concealed, which is  
53  
54 expected to reduce the danger of boomerang effects (Gilboa, 2001, p. 7). The third variant of  
55  
56 PD efforts puts *non-state actors* in the focus. While NGOs usually have less financial  
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resources at their disposal than governments, some of them (like Greenpeace or Amnesty International, for example) specialize in high-profile protest events or make their voices heard in transnational media debates in order to support sympathizers in target countries who, in turn, are expected to put pressure on their domestic governments. Media events turn up as an important possible ingredient of media diplomacy in Gilboa's (2001, p. 13) account. Global staged political media events as defined above are strategically utilized by governments in an attempt to showcase a new era of cooperation and peace.

### **Accounting for Ritual and Deliberative Dimensions of Public Diplomacy**

Applying a ritual as well as a deliberative perspective in the analysis of (mediated) public diplomacy can help to better explain why transnational strategic communication efforts fail more often than their sponsors would like. Taking up the example of summit meetings in the context of media diplomacy the ritual perspective raises our awareness for the fact that rituals rely on the assumption of benevolent intentions on all sides. Participants, media as well as citizens must suspend their disbelief and engage in using the event for ritual imaginations of community. They must collaborate in the attempt to create an uncontested celebration (see figure 2). As we have seen above, this is not easy to achieve because summit meetings are, after all, strategically staged, and due to the logic of "conflictualization" (Dayan, 2010). Mediated rituals are a risky business, particularly when the strategic intentions behind them are all too obvious and participants fail to collaborate.

From a deliberative perspective, further insights can be obtained as to why public diplomacy efforts sometimes fail and what can be done about that. The public deliberation perspective is predicated on the exchange of ideas and arguments. In the context of transnational strategic communication it opens our eyes for the argumentative resources needed to render (mediated) public diplomacy efforts convincing to target audiences in the long term and across large cultural and political divides. It is one thing to create a transient feeling of goodwill and hope on a particular occasion. But in order to dispel skepticism and

mitigate cynicism and hostility more persistently audiences need to understand why the interpretation propagated by the public diplomacy sponsor should be believed. This can only be achieved, the deliberative perspective reminds us, by intelligible justifications that render the proposed interpretation legitimate. This idea is captured well in the concept of consensus-oriented public relations (COPR; Burkart, 2004, and 2008) that builds on Habermas' (1981) distinction between three different validity claims. According to Burkart, recipients of public relations messages routinely doubt the *truth* of what is said, the *trustworthiness* of the communicator and the *legitimacy* of their interests and aims. Public relations practitioners respond to these doubts by providing facts and explanations (truth) and providing justifications for the positions of the communicator (legitimacy). Interestingly, trustworthiness cannot be directly communicated by public relations because communicators can prove their sincerity only by subsequent action. It becomes evident from this perspective that a public diplomacy strategy that neglects facts, explanations and effective justifications will not be able to appease doubts in the target population, at least not in the long run and not in encounters that involve strong cultural differences or histories of violence and subjugation.

Conclusion

Transnational communication is a complex phenomenon. It exists across and beyond national borders and yet the nation-state continues to exert a decisive structuring influence on such border-crossing communicative flows. But divisions along the lines of national borders do not tell the entire story either. We find transnational media outlets targeting audiences around the globe, border-crossing public debates on issues of global concern, media events that receive transnational attention, and public diplomacy efforts that succeed – and fail – in characteristic patterns around the world. All of this attests to the networked and hybrid nature of today's global media and communication environment (see, for example, Tomlinson, 1999; Kraidy, 2005; Thussu, 2006; Hepp, 2006).

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3 However, the point we wish to make in this article goes beyond the dialectic of the  
4 national and the transnational. Our focus is on the insights that can be gained from combining  
5 different perspectives on this dialectic and drawing on evidence from Western and Non-  
6 Western countries. Transnational communication phenomena can be understood as  
7 deliberative, as ritual and as strategic communication. And the specific connections that can  
8 be drawn between these three perspectives generate new and deeper insights and open up new  
9 avenues for empirical research.

10  
11 The public deliberation approach to transnational communication highlights the ability  
12 of national and transnational actors and media to mutually engage in meaningful  
13 argumentative exchange across national borders. And it has been highly instructive in  
14 identifying the countries, media outlets, and situations in which such an exchange does occur  
15 as well as those circumstances under which communicative realities fall short of the  
16 normative ideal. When it comes to explaining such *normative failure* it is helpful to bring  
17 strategic and ritual elements into the picture. Multi-level communication environments such  
18 as transnational media debates offer incentives for national actors to engage in selective  
19 scape-goating and credit-claiming. This strategically rational behavior, in turn, disturbs  
20 citizens' ability to rationally evaluate transnational as well as national policy, at least in the  
21 absence of strong cross-checking mechanisms in the media most people use. And such  
22 mechanisms are lacking because national media tend to follow the lead of national  
23 governments and more often than not recycle the myth of the self-sufficient and autonomous  
24 national community.

25  
26 The mediated ritual perspective accentuates the experience of "fellowship and  
27 commonality" associated with particular transnational media events. Whether they offer  
28 opportunities to celebrate, mourn, console or revolt, media events help construct and imagine  
29 parochial or cosmopolitan communities. Their experiential valence and the constellation of  
30 symbolic resources across different audiences determine whether media events lead to



increased ‘othering’ or enhanced cosmopolitan ‘we-ness’. While the mediated ritual approach, and media event theory in particular, have contributed greatly to understanding successful climaxes of transnational communication, they have been somewhat weaker in explaining its failings. Strategic and deliberative perspectives can help here. Media events lose some of their enchantment and ritual power due to over-strategizing: Almost anything can be subjected to media event treatment today so that each individual event is less valuable for the ritual imagination of community. In addition, traditions of national discourses set clear boundaries for how easily and legitimately journalists can leave their critical observer position and indulge in the reverent media event mode. What imposes itself as an occasion to celebrate in one culture provokes critical discussion and resistance in another culture.

Finally, the strategic perspective demonstrates how both state and non-state actors try to influence media coverage and public opinion in other countries in order to further their own goals – and how at the same time they strategize to avoid boomerang effects. In today’s networked real-time communication environment public diplomacy efforts must accept trade-offs between pleasing domestic audiences and catering to foreign constituencies. In this context ritual and discursive perspectives can help explain the failure particularly of short-term event-oriented public diplomacy efforts. Media events can be useful tools in public diplomacy efforts but their success depends on the assumption of benevolent intentions and some degree of collaboration from all participants, something that can by no means be taken for granted in a strategic context. And the discursive perspective reminds us that lasting public diplomacy success needs more than transient feelings of goodwill, but hinges on the availability and acceptance of sincere justifications for one’s position. Strategy cannot be “freed” from critical discourse.

Our theoretical analysis of the potential for mutual enrichment and cross-fertilization between the deliberative, ritual and strategic perspectives on transnational communication opens the door for empirical investigations that tap into these synergies. Explanatory potential

often seems to lie just outside the limited vision of each of the three perspectives as well as outside an individual researcher's own familiar cultural environment. As we have shown, public spheres may rely on very different sets of media and communicative forms in a particular non-Western context than a Westerner would expect. A transnational media event may evoke anger in one corner of the world and pride in another, thus deepening hostile collective identifications across the divide. And ill-conceived Western public diplomacy may strengthen distrust e.g. in the Arab world instead of fostering understanding. It seems that the irrefutable differences in outlook between Western and non-Western contexts push researchers around the globe to ask for the reasons of communicative failure in transnational communication. And this focus on why cross-border communication fails, along with synergies derived from combining the three perspectives outlined above, promises to inspire future theory development.

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Figure 1

*A typology of transnational media events*

		Dominant experiential valence			
		Celebrating (euphoria, hope, etc.)	Mourning (shock, dismay, etc.)	Consoling (support, encour- agement, etc.)	Revolting (outrage, protest, etc.)
Transnational constellation of symbolic resources	Rather undisputed	<i>Eurovision Song Contest 2010 ("Lena")</i>	<i>Tsunami Indian Ocean 2004/2005</i>	<i>Charity concert "Live Aid" 1985</i>	<i>Abu Ghraib picture scandal 2004</i>
	Rather disputed	<i>Beijing Olympics 2008</i>	<i>9/11</i>	<i>Nobel Peace Prize 1994 awarded to Jassir Arafat<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Mohammed cartoon crisis 2005</i>

*Note.* Examples for the respective type of media event are displayed in italics.

<sup>a</sup>The prize was simultaneously awarded to Jassir Arafat, Shimon Peres and Jitzhak Rabin, but the dispute was mainly about whether a "former terrorist" (Arafat) should receive the prize.